



# Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context

*Studies in Honor of  
Irene J. Winter by Her Students*

*Edited by*  
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CULTURE & HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

# BLURRING THE EDGES: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE TREATMENT OF ENEMIES IN ASHURBANIPAL'S RELIEFS<sup>1</sup>

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The imperial art of Neo-Assyria is famously violent—battle narratives lined the palace walls in order to awe the spectator with the power of the king and the state. Like any good story, the Neo-Assyrian narratives contain overt and subtle elements that create thematic tension: alongside glorified depictions of the conquering Assyrians are less conspicuous, but intriguing portraits of the vanquished. These images not only draw the viewer into the action, but can also evoke varied and complex responses.<sup>2</sup> In Nineveh, during the reigns of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) and Ashurbanipal (669-627 B.C.), the palace sculptures

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<sup>1</sup> I am honored to contribute to this volume in honor of Irene Winter, my teacher and surrogate advisor, who has gifted me with the boundless generosity and devotion she bestows upon each of her students. The original version of this paper was developed for her seminar on cross-cultural aesthetics (Harvard University, 2005). Irene continues to inspire my deepest gratitude and admiration, and I can only hope that maturing versions of this study will complement her own pioneering approach to Neo-Assyrian art.

I am also grateful to Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, Ömür Harmanşah, and Jack Cheng, whose insights were indispensable to this paper, and to Peter Machinist, for the gift of his personal bibliographical sources.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to both the modern and ancient viewer, while recognizing the problematic nature of “audience” and the difficulties of evaluating aesthetic response. How do we begin to compare modern encounters with the reliefs to those of the Assyrians themselves? Winter (2002, 18) summarizes that when approaching aesthetics, “the cultural and the social must be engaged as necessary variables between the subject and the species”. For both audiences, reactions to particular stimuli would derive from the individual’s socio-historical situation and personal experiences (see note 3 below). Though we lack contemporary Assyrian accounts of the sculptures’ visual effectiveness, the palace reliefs, not to mention the very nature of Mesopotamian art, provide insight into Assyrian aesthetic value. There is an emphasis upon ornament or “auspicious” objects, exotic “otherness” (whether man or beast), in movement or action sequences, descriptive clarity and design symmetry. These attributes reflect cultural ideals of beauty, designed to produce the desired affect in the intended audience. Given the variety of individuals who may have viewed the reliefs, we can surmise that even variations of “fear” and “awe” would fail to capture the full range of responses (see Winter 1998, esp. 66-67 on “style” and “affective agency”; 2002 on the “language” of Mesopotamian aesthetic experience).

reached new levels of novelty, complexity and sensitivity; aspects that may go unobserved to those more accustomed to Western narrative styles.<sup>3</sup>

From a modern perspective, the artistic treatment of Assyria's opponents, especially in the reign of Ashurbanipal, suggests conflicting perceptions of the enemy, which may indicate conflicting motivational values at work within imperial propaganda. The violent sculptural themes reflect the king's struggle to maintain as well as justify his realm; and while the palace narratives give the impression of extreme confidence in Assyria's invincibility, they nonetheless contain traces of an existential uncertainty that pervades Mesopotamian thought (see Bottero 2001; Frankfort 1971, 262-274; Jacobsen 1977, 202-219; Oppenheim 1964). I will argue that the complexity of Assyrian royal ideology is evident in depictions of foreign captives that are not purely hostile and demeaning but suggest an element of "good shepherd" protectiveness. These "emotive" images are found within scenarios of human interaction or familial relationships. At the same time, they are often juxtaposed with elements that imply imminent danger or death, leaving authorial intent ambiguous, and allowing for multiple interpretations.

The examples provided below are primarily excerpts from the battle narratives of Ashurbanipal. Most are "minor" representations of Assyrian war victims within a relief sequence, or *vignettes*. The vignettes layer various episodes within the narrative that enhance the larger story,

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A useful source for the ancient Assyrian audience is Russell's (1991) analysis of Sennacherib's palace sculptures, their intent, and how Assyrian elites and visitors to the palace might have received them.

<sup>3</sup> The essential sources for Neo-Assyrian sculpture are listed in *Iraq* 34 (Reade 1972, 112). For the full corpus of sculptures from the Southwest and North Palaces, see Barnett (1976) and Barnett et al. (1998).

Winter (2002) outlines the problems of European aesthetic scholarship and its hindrances to reconstructing a non-Western aesthetic experience. The influence of this intellectual heritage is evident in cases where scholars found Assyrian art to be deficient as "true" narrative: the standardized, "lifeless" human figures failed to meet a Western ideal of reality, where individual human features and emotions can be distinguished (Bersani and Dutoit 1985, 7). Thus scholars concluded that Assyrian art lacked human relations, and without a variety of "expression," the reliefs could not produce a powerful emotional response in the viewer (e.g. Strommenger 1964, 10-11; Parrot 1961, 12-13). These individuals, accustomed to traditional Western hierarchies of "art" and "beauty," saw bland repetition in a style that adhered to an Assyrian aesthetic ideal, expressed by symmetry and traditionalized human forms (see Albenda 1998, 30; Reade 1979, 331; Winter 1981, 10; 1995).

and create subtle associations in the mind of the viewer. Due to the stylistic conventions of Assyrian art, human faces and bodies were generally standardized and rendered in traditional Mesopotamian profiles. Due to the lack of individualized human features, some scholars have found that Assyrian art lacked emotive expression (see note 2); but the vignettes utilize postures and gestures, and perceptive, true-to-life details that contribute to the emotional character of the episode. The vignette seems to be a particularly appropriate viewing methodology for our purposes, since one of its definitions is “an image with no definite border, but its edges are gradually faded into the background (Webster’s New World Dictionary).” I will address this aspect in more detail in the next section, and suggest that “blurred edges” in the vignettes create startling irregularities that add tension to the narratives, keeping the viewer off-balance and in anticipation (or perhaps apprehension) of the next act. In my view, the narrative function of these images is nonetheless subservient to their larger ideological implications, and within these vignettes lies the underlying power of the palace reliefs.

### *Blurring the Edges*

Beginning in the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC), the Assyrian kings developed a unique form of sculptural narrative in ancient Mesopotamia. The palace reliefs commonly document the king’s activities, selected battles, and episodes of Assyrian life, especially on campaign. The ideology of the Assyrian kings lay in the stories they told—and what is a more riveting vehicle than action sequences? Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (1985, 64) observe that in Assyrian palace reliefs, “visual analogies are subverted by the obstacles we encounter.” In other words, to make connections between images, we must pass through “interesting space which diverts us from the connection...[T]hey touch, ultimately, through the mediation of other forms.” “Incongruous” images can be used to arrest our attention, and force awareness of the overall context and subtle complexities of the narrative. Marcel Proust (1924) observed that the cultivation of illusion required the artist to obscure the edges of demarcation, so that passing between images created a sense of constant movement. Only then would the viewer grasp the essence of the work, or apprehend the commonalities between objects, space and time that perhaps should not logically

connect. Bersani and Dutoit (1985, 63) summarize Proust's argument as follows:

The writer and painter should deliberately cultivate those illusions which blur the distinctness of individual objects. For each such illusion may be the sign of a hidden quality common to different objects (or to different moments of time) . . . The demarcations between past and present, between land and sea, fade; juxtaposed objects are fused in a transcendental identity; and the heterogeneous space of human life would be replaced by a unifying, homogenous space of essences.

Proust believed that the goal of art was to recapture the “errors” of our original vision by the creation of this constant movement between melded boundaries. In his “psychic space” between the terms of all relations (or for example, between events in the narratives), Proust found that there can also be a “detemporalizing essence,” or a past sensation that invades the present, leaving the viewer somewhere in between.

These arguments point to the power of “minor” irregularities that distort the frames of contrasting spaces, marking commonalities where they might otherwise be obscured, and creating narrative depth. By “blurring” the borders of multiple vignettes, the artist can move the viewer’s gaze between elements in the narrative that are seemingly contradictory, producing ambiguous readings and suggesting multiple outcomes.

In the battle reliefs, the border of a vignette of foreign captives often seems to be a “suggestive” marker between the captives and an alternate fate. A recurring “border” for instance is the Assyrian soldier, who alternately watches over the “civilian captives”—exiles who will be relocated to other Assyrian lands—and/or the “enemy soldiers” who are being roughly treated, even killed, in the space beyond. The soldier’s purpose then becomes open to question: to which scenario does he truly belong; and is he “guard,” or could he be “guardian”? In some cases, where we only have a portion of a relief sequence, the borders of a scene are enforced; creating associations that may or may not be true to the original narrative (see below, the “Minor Images”).

*Assyria and Its “Enemies”*

Neo-Assyrian kings were anxious to prove their own worthiness and surpass the achievements of their predecessors. Thus each new palace contained its own corpus of personal propaganda, with themes designed to emphasize a specific royal persona. The scenes are largely commemorative, created with specific details that lend authenticity to the historical moment (Russell 1991, 256).<sup>4</sup> This propensity for distinguishing details also extends to the rendering of foreign peoples. Julian Reade (1979, 334-335) comments, “in one respect...[foreigners] are all treated alike: tremendous care is taken to represent them, their cultural and sometimes physical characteristics, and the landscapes in which they live...[A] receptive attitude is implicit in the sculptures.” Assyria’s general interest in novelty or “otherness” appears in both text and image; when viewing the reliefs, Reade (1979, n. 12) recalls Leo Oppenheim’s commentary on the account of Sargon’s eighth campaign:

The text addresses itself at an audience really interested in learning about foreign peoples, their way of life, their religion and customs...[T]he attitude just described indicates an audience sure of itself, deeply imbued with a conscious tradition of native origin but, at the same time, aware of the existence of other traditions without reacting to them so intensely as to evolve patterns of either aggression or fossilizing self-isolation.

As Oppenheim observes, the figures of the defeated seem to be treated with a rather detached scrutiny, but their prevalence, and the artists’ attention to detail, suggests that the Assyrians were not indifferent to the plight of the conquered. The reason for this is perhaps multivalent: an inherent interest in “otherness,” the potential contributions of deportees to the Assyrian state, and an ideological component manifest in royal hymns and inscriptions, in which one of the king’s roles is “pious shepherd,” or protector of the weak (see Livingstone 1997; Oded 1992; Saggs 1982).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There is nonetheless “an ideological ‘end’” to the historicity of the representations (Winter 1981, 3). For instance, the Assyrians depict only successful battles, and only the enemy can be shown wounded or killed. The narratives may contain elements of suspense, but the eventual Assyrian victory is a foregone conclusion.

<sup>5</sup> On the scale of Assyrian deportations and the resettlement of foreigners, see B. Oded (1979; 1992). Tiglath-Pileser III asserts that he added “countless people” to the land of Assyria, and “continuously herded them in safe pastures” (Tadmor 1994, 105

If we take the reliefs at face value, the various representations of the defeated can be viewed as another element of royal propaganda, a political tool used to contrast the misery and simplicity of these societies with the strength, sophistication and general superiority of the Assyrians. Indeed, conquered peoples are often shown humbled and subservient, their hands upraised and beseeching their captors, and sometimes performing forced labor.<sup>6</sup> Artists illustrate the torture and death of enemy soldiers and/or their leaders, while the Assyrian army razes its weakened city (for example, figures 1, 2, 11). The Assyrian narratives told a cautionary tale: in order to dissuade disloyalty and rebellion by foreigners and courtiers alike (Russell 1991, 256), the artists displayed the atrocities incurred by the enemy with a rather macabre relish. Certain peoples were treated with greater or lesser consideration and uncooperative nomadic peoples, for instance, seem to have fallen in the latter category.<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of battle, Assyria's policy in dealing with the defeated was generally commensurate with the historical cooperation of the foreign state and the category of allegiance to which it belonged (see Reade 1979, 334). Severe punishment, meaning the public execution of local dignitaries, forced labor, or the elimination of an entire people, was the exception rather than the rule, occurring in cases of particularly recalcitrant tribes or rebellious tributary states (Reade 1979, 334; Saggs 1982). Sennacherib's destruction of Lachish, and the consequences to its people, is a famous example of what happened when tributary states rebelled against their Assyrian overlords.<sup>8</sup>

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col. II B, 15-24; see also Oded 1992, 36-38). Correspondence between the king and his officials also indicate the Assyrian government's concern for war prisoners, or *hubtānu*; reports contain instructions to provide prisoners with footwear, cattle and sheep, and even wives (Saggs 1982, 91-92). Saggs (1982, 92) remarks here,

"Whilst this [the treatment of captives] certainly does not suggest any abstract concern for human life, it does indicate a complete lack of racialism; senior Assyrian administrators and foreign war-prisoners were not thought of as beings in different categories, and the life of the Assyrian administrator might be required if any of the prisoners came to harm by his negligence...except for those guilty of some specific offense against the state, the king's duty was to shepherd all peoples equally."

<sup>6</sup> In the Southwest Palace, Sennacherib illustrates the quarrying and transport of a human-headed winged bull by gangs of foreign prisoners (Reade 1998, fig. 51).

<sup>7</sup> An image from Ashurbanipal shows Assyrian soldiers in their battle encampment, assaulting the women of an unruly Arab tribe (Reade 1979, fig. 10).

<sup>8</sup> After the battle of Lachish, processions of captives are shown marching along a rocky landscape with the Assyrian army. A few soldiers carry looted items from the be-

The battle narratives were primarily concerned, however, with commemorating an Assyrian victory, and war victims, in their varied states, were the proofs of that victory; “civilian” captives, in my opinion, are not consistently, nor perhaps even intentionally, demeaned. There are several instances in which an exceptional rendering by the artist provides a figure with subtle dignity (for example, figure 4), indicating close observation of the subject, and moreover, that the ideology behind portraits of Assyrian captives is not so straightforward. In the reliefs, there seems to be a distinction made between pictures of the actual enemy—meaning the foreign king, his officials and soldiers, and the civilians—foreign peoples subject to the fate of their city-state. In Assyrian terms, war was morally and ethically justified as a crusade against the foreign monarch whose rebellious acts made him unfit to govern his peoples. Campaigns were launched in order to “defend the subjects of a foreign country against the unjust sovereign … through the agency of war he [the Assyrian king] sets right the injustice committed by the transgressors” (Oded 1992, 37-38). Foreign subjects, rid of their “oppressors,” came under the protection of the *šarru kēnu, rā’im kānāti* “true king, lover of justice” (Oded 1992, 38). As we will see, the narratives often juxtapose two groups of Assyrian victims, showing vignettes of relatively well-treated civilians next to harshly treated prisoners. The borders of adjacent vignettes can be “blurred” via artistic devices or irregular scenic elements, drawing attention to two versions of imperial “justice.”

### *The “Minor” Images: Assyrian Captive Vignettes*

Some of the most striking aspects of the Assyrian campaign sequences are the realistic details, revealing the activities of the Assyrians and their opponents within the midst of warfare. Many intricate reliefs capture the “climax” of the battle, showing the Assyrian army besieging a fortified city with arrows and battering rams, while firebrands

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sieged city (Reade 1998, fig. 68). Toward the front of the procession, male prisoners stand before Assyrian officials, humbly bent forward from the waist, their hands upraised and signifying their distress. Families carrying their possessions follow, with small children clinging to the skirts of their parents. In front of the exiles, two local dignitaries are flayed while others are beheaded for their roles in the rebellion (Reade 1979, 334). The artist shows the relatively well-treated families with the tortured rebels, and deftly incorporates bodily postures and gestures to convey the captives’ fear and anxiety.

rain down from above. An example from Sennacherib's assault of Lachish depicts three enemy dead impaled on staves in the lower right foreground, and in the center of the fighting, a small row of captives file out of the walled fortress carrying their possessions (figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

A comparable scene from the reign of Ashurbanipal shows the Assyrian army toppling Egyptian soldiers from their defenses, collecting enemy heads, and setting fire to the city (figure 2). In the center of this image, a procession of enemy warriors emerges from a tower gate, "interrupting" the battle scene by breaking the dividing line between the upper and lower registers. The curving groundline beneath the procession diverts the viewer's eyes downward and toward the left, where the warriors are bound and led away by Assyrian soldiers—two of whom triumphantly hoist the decapitated heads of fallen Egyptians. This procession is contrasted with a row of civilian exiles on the far right. The individual leading the group carries a basket pole that merges into the line of doomed warriors, fusing the two processions, and blurring the lines between exile and (presumed) execution for the soldiers. The "innocents" are facing the warriors: their focus, and ours, is guided toward the harsher punishment of Egypt's defenders. Yet among the group of exiles is another vignette that distracts from the spectacle of Assyria's revenge—two small children are riding out on a donkey, both of whom nervously turn back toward their "father" (figure 3). This man guides the animal from behind with one hand, and balances a bundle upon his head with the other.<sup>10</sup> The little ones are either looking toward their father for comfort, or alternatively, are distracted by a child seen just beyond this group, riding on another man's shoulders. The man is holding one of the little boy's legs against him, but with his other hand, he lifts the boy's arm up in the direction of the other children, perhaps in order to greet them.

In Assyrian narratives, the civilian peoples of a besieged city are often shown in this manner, ostensibly in the process of relocation to other parts of the empire. As they march with their families and meager belongings, the artists depict mothers nursing their babies,

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<sup>9</sup> Sennacherib reports (perhaps with exaggeration) that he deported 200,150 people for resettlement after this campaign (Reade 1998, 48).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Barnett et al. (1998, pl. 246), where a Chaldaean family is pictured in a similar manner: a woman sits upon a donkey with a naked male (?) child riding behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist. The "father" walks behind, grasping the tail of the donkey. This excerpt, like figure 4 of this article, is from the "marsh battle" sequence from the Southwest Palace, but is attributed to Ashurbanipal. See below, note 13.

and fathers carrying older children upon their shoulders.<sup>11</sup> A well-known, sensitively carved image from Ashurbanipal shows a Chaldaean woman on the march, stopping to give her child water from an animal skin (figure 4). The vignette makes the procession of captives memorable, but its message is ambiguous: it alerts the audience to the Chaldaeans' misfortune and vulnerability, while at the same time, its seeming empathy diverts attention from the source of their plight (that is, Assyrian aggression). Are we to view the Assyrians as their captors, or liberators?

Another remarkable sequence of vignettes, and one that poses a similar question, comes from a relief commemorating Ashurbanipal's victory over the Elamites at Hamanu (figure 5). In a small register just below the main battle scene, two groups of prisoners, or four sets of "couples," are seated in the Assyrian camp around cooking cauldrons. Their gestures suggest lively conversations in progress: on the left, one woman raises her arm, palm up, toward the woman sitting across from her (figure 6). The woman on the right returns the same gesture with her right hand, while holding a bowl in her left. The man seated next to her is looking toward the figure opposite him, a man who is perhaps minding the cauldron: his right arm is shown stretched toward it, with his fingers touching the top of the vessel. The artist may also be using this gesture to convey directionality: the arm is lifted toward the man facing him, alerting the viewer that these two individuals are engaged in a separate conversation from the women.

On the right side of this register is another, similar group of captives (figure 7). This time, however, the alternating positions of the men and women enliven the scene. In order to show that the two men are conversing with one another, the man on the right leans forward, his right arm stretched *across* his body and down toward the man on the opposite side. Another male stands next to the seated figures holding what looks to be a drinking vessel, perhaps a wineskin, to his lips. The man is inclined in the direction of a seated woman whose hands are lifted toward him, as if she is requesting a taste. The two women in this scene are not speaking with one another: one directs her attention toward the man with the "wineskin," while the woman on the opposite side is turned, gesturing toward an Assyrian guard behind her. Her arm is held up, palm open, mimicking the same "conversational"

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<sup>11</sup> See also Barnett et al., 1998, pl. 213, fig. 285b; pl. 465, fig. 645b.

gesture as the women on the left portion of the register. It is unclear whether the scene ended with the guard, or was continued on another relief panel; only the battle above and the first register below exist in their entirety, but the panel is cropped evenly behind the Assyrian guard, suggesting that he was in fact the “border” of this scene.<sup>12</sup> The woman *could* have been gesturing toward someone behind the guard in a missing panel, yet her fingers are touching his shield, suggesting that the artist wants to draw our attention to the guard’s presence, or to the group’s imprisonment. It may also indicate that the woman is in conversation with her captor.

A separate relief fragment from the “Hamanu” series also shows Elamite and Chaldaean prisoners in the Assyrian camp, one of whom is stoking the campfire (figure 8). To the far left is an Assyrian soldier, his back to the group of prisoners. Two women behind him are just entering the camp carrying their possessions and are welcomed by a seated man who turns and waves to them. The first woman’s head is turned back toward her friend who follows behind, but she has one arm stretched toward the man who greets them, palm up, seemingly “introducing” him to her female companion. The relief stops just beyond the image of an Assyrian soldier to the left, and just behind a group of two other male captives conversing on the right. The fragment seems to have been roughly the same width as the camp register described above, but nonetheless remains a “snapshot” of a scene: without the remaining panel or panels, we cannot be certain if the Assyrian guard was originally part of another episode, guarding another group of prisoners, or whether he indeed guarded the perimeter of this space. As it remains, his shield, turned toward a hypothetical threat to the camp, implies to the viewer an element of protectiveness; moreover, the women entering the scene convey no signs of agitation—their gestures and body postures indicate a happy reunion.

The tone of the camp vignettes is created by the actions of the participants; human relations, even emotions, are conveyed without individual facial expressions. The episodes may be viewed as a poised threat within a convivial atmosphere; a subtle warning that creates

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<sup>12</sup> There are fragments of camp vignettes that most likely made up two more registers below this one. See Barnett (1976, pl. LXVI), which illustrates all the remaining images from this series. We have a small piece of the second camp register, showing similar couples seated around a cauldron.

tension. But while they raise awareness of the captives' reduced circumstances, it also suggests that rather than being "threatened," they are being "protected" by the Assyrians. Both viewpoints serve to emphasize Assyrian dominance, but the nuances of the scenes leave the captives' status open to interpretation, highlighting a problematic aspect of the vignette: without knowing if an extended scenario existed, the images can become mentally parsed into vignettes with ambiguous readings.

A series of illustrations from the Southwest palace of Sennacherib (but usually attributed to his grandson Ashurbanipal, who occupied the palace early in his reign) recreates the capture of Chaldaean refugees from southern Babylonia.<sup>13</sup> Groups of Assyrian soldiers in reed boats are systematically apprehending escapees hiding in the marshes (figure 9). The particular vignette I would like to draw attention to is a group of three figures huddled together within a bank of marsh reeds: an older, bearded male in a short tunic, his hair bound by a fillet, crouches on a reed boat facing two smaller, beardless individuals in long robes, either male or female, and presumably children (figure 10). The male is presumably their father and is perched upon the prow of the boat, his posture inclined protectively toward the younger refugees. His right hand is placed on his lap, while his left is lifted in a fist. The two children have their left hands fisted upon their laps, but their right hands are raised, palms up. The gestures of the Chaldaean "family" indicate that they are either in the midst of an activity—perhaps a prayer, or a game of distraction.

This small moment captures the Chaldaeans' anxiety and the overall precariousness of their situation. Adding tension to the scene is a headless, naked enemy body floating in the water nearby. Its legs overlap with the upper portion of the reed bank that camouflages the group, insinuating danger by blurring the space between their hiding place and the open water, or between "safety" and "death." The headless body and relentless progression of Assyrian soldiers imply the ultimate capture of our group of refugees, but the viewer is, at least momentarily, unsure of their fate.

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<sup>13</sup> For the full marsh battle sequence, see Barnett et al. (1998, pls. 233-265). The dating of the reliefs to Ashurbanipal seems very likely, according to E. Bleibtreau (Barnett et al. 1998, 88). No inscriptions survive on these slabs, but the adjacent room, XXXIII, was redecorated with reliefs after Sennacherib's reign. On stylistic grounds, they have been attributed to the same period of Ashurbanipal's sculptures in the North Palace.

The “Battle of Til Tuba” series from the Southwest Palace (also from the reign of Ashurbanipal), illustrates the merciless (and unambiguous) fate of one of Assyria’s most worthy opponents and exemplifies the evolving complexity of Assyrian palace narrative (figure 11). The horizontal groundlines, or registers, that traditionally divided narrative sequences were distorted in the reign of Sennacherib, creating sweeping landscapes, and for “Til Tuba,” Ashurbanipal’s artists take full advantage of this innovation: though the registers are not entirely discarded, they are abbreviated and blurred by continuous and overlapping action sequences. The directional gestures of the soldiers, the strategic positioning of weapons, and finally, the head of the Elamite king Teumman, act as guideposts, moving the viewer through an intricate battle landscape and a grand chase (Bersani and Dutoit 1985; Watanabe 2004; see also Bahrani 2004; Bonatz 2004): the Assyrians capture and kill Teumman and his son, bringing the head of the Elamite ruler home to hang as a prize in Ashurbanipal’s garden (figures 12, 13).

The “Battle of Til Tuba” relief is a deliberate, ordered chaos: the space is littered with seemingly jumbled yet carefully orchestrated vignettes that provide a fuller picture of the action, but the head of Teumman connects the scenarios to Ashurbanipal’s ultimate victory. In the final act, it hangs if we look closely, we find the head hanging in a tree on the edges of the king’s celebratory banquet—almost as an afterthought. Yet its subtle, almost nonchalant placement, extraneous to the main event, makes its insertion all the more chilling, and thereby more powerful. The small, grisly trophy contradicts the complacent tranquility of Ashurbanipal’s garden, where the king lounges upon his royal couch next to the queen. It symbolizes a humiliating defeat for the Elamites, but this incongruous memento of victory also signals the thematic tension of the narratives, where life and death are juxtaposed, creating a pervasive anxiety. The banquet panel is comparatively small, only about as large as the register of Elamites in the Assyrian camp, yet like the headless body in the Chaldaean marsh, it encapsulates the power of suggestion that propels the battle sequences.

*King as Conqueror, King as Shepherd*

The overall character of Assyrian battle narratives does not suggest to me that the vignettes of “innocents” are a conscious effort toward “humanitarianism.” Rather, the artists documented highlights from the battle and its aftermath that most efficiently, and effectively, conveyed the imperial message. The ambiguities are more likely a result of the nature of that message: in text and image, we can observe each ruler’s anxiety to fulfill the duties of royal office required by the gods, and to justify the traditional titles of great Mesopotamian rulers: not only “king of the world,” but also “pious shepherd.”<sup>14</sup> In Assyrian royal ideology, native *and* foreign peoples were to be cared for as the “flock” of Aššur. The Assyrians felt themselves bound to the gods; taking the royal office required that the king meet divine expectations, which were embedded in Assyrian cultural traditions and the royal ideological code (Livingstone 1997, 165-166). Middle Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian rituals and royal hymns express Aššur’s wish that with his “sword,” the king expand his imperial borders *and* his peoples (Tadmor 1999, 58; see also Weissert 1997, 240).

I would suggest that the “humanity” of the Assyrian sculptures is not to be found in Western preconceptions of how human emotion is expressed, but in the carefully wrought vignettes within each battle sequence—they contain narratives within narratives that provide a fuller picture not only of the campaign but also its consequences. The fate of the enemy was part of the historical moment represented, but also intertwined with that of Assyria itself; and in the Assyrian worldview, “safety,” even for themselves, was a relative term. Assyria’s religious ideology (and its particular form of imperial anxiety) was conditioned by its geopolitical situation: the heartland lay on a crossroads between Anatolia, Iran, Babylonia, Arabia and Syria-Palestine. With few natural barriers, Assyria’s success as a trading nation in the late third and early second millennium attracted foreign aggression and eventual

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<sup>14</sup> M. Liverani explains that Sennacherib’s epithets evolved over time: from “*pious* shepherd, *fearful* of the great gods” to “*expert* shepherd, *favorite* of the great gods” (after 697 B.C.) (Russell 1991, 242, citing Liverani). The late, more confident title suggests to Liverani that Sennacherib earned the title only after several years of successful campaigning—after he had filled the role of “heroic warrior.” Sennacherib, following in the wake of Sargon’s ominous and untimely death, believed that his future was uncertain—the gods did not automatically bestow a king with good fortune, and the right to rule must be earned.

domination; by the late second millennium, Assyria responded with an offensive policy of conquest and expansion (Livingstone 1997, 165, citing Oppenheim). By the Neo-Assyrian period, war was the natural “vocation” of the king (Oded 1992, 38).

Irene Winter (2002, 66-67) remarks that in art, “certain visual attributes derive from the special geographical and/or historical situation of the producing culture...[T]hey represent not-necessarily-conscious reflections of worldview and experiences held by some members of that culture.” I might propose that those instances of “receptive,” even “empathetic” renderings of victims convey that, although the king’s role may have necessitated warfare and conquest (Livingstone 1997; Oded 1992; Tadmor 1999), it did not preclude (consciously or otherwise) an understanding of the inherent vulnerability of man, whether victor or vanquished. It is this underlying apprehension, or anxiety, that may be reflected in the varied representations of Assyria’s opponents. Royal rhetoric aside, Assyria recognized that there were practical limits to its external control, and its relationships with foreign states, whether equal, tributary or subject, were designed to insure Assyria’s own stability. The “unquestioning loyalty” of Assyrian citizens (particularly soldiers) to the crown is a common ancient Near Eastern artistic idiom, but Assyria’s attitude toward the world outside the empire was necessarily more complicated, “reflecting in a practical fashion the realities of imperial power and responsibility” (Reade 1979, 332).

Whatever the authors’ or artists’ motivations, I would argue that Assyrian narrative *hinges* upon human relationships and their emotive affect, due to both the intense vitality of the vignettes and the small, tension-creating details that capture the precarious circumstances of life in the Neo-Assyrian period. The contradiction of the captive images lies in the fact that these peoples are ostensibly Assyria’s enemies, who have been robbed of their homelands and will be deported to other parts of the Assyrian empire to become Assyrianized. They may reflect, however, the desire of the king’s desire to be depicted not only as “heroic warrior,” expanding the empire and defeating upstart rivals, but also as “good shepherd,” defender of the innocent and protector of his own.

Embedded within the late palace reliefs are scenes that, perhaps not altogether consciously, reveal the complex character of Assyrian imperialism. The king’s outward show of invincibility is colored by the

realities of maintaining the “four quarters” and the demands of his position as divine liaison. The vignettes suggest his attempt to balance a dual role: conqueror and shepherd, or his practical and ideological responsibilities. This struggle is underscored within violent propaganda that signified a strong central authority—one that perceived warfare, and its consequences, as a necessity. The “enemy” vignettes, however, are full of ambiguities that convey the inherent tragedy of the situation; and therein lies their power to captivate. They transcend the morbid recesses of the battleground, blurring triumph with tragedy, and persecution with protection.

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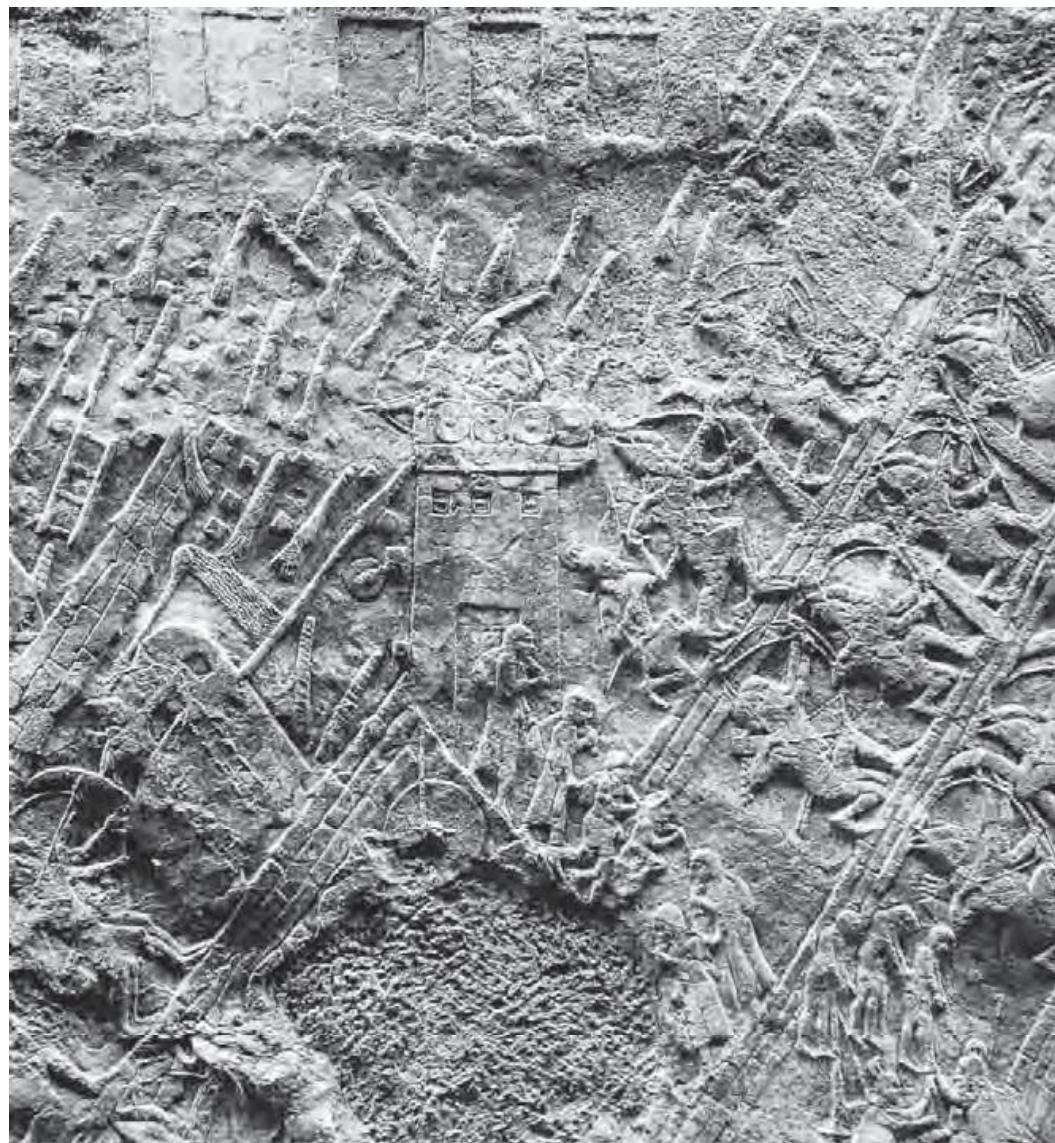


Figure 1. The Assyrian assault on Lachish (British Museum, WA 124906; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 2. The Assyrian army attacking an Egyptian town (British Museum, WA 124928; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)

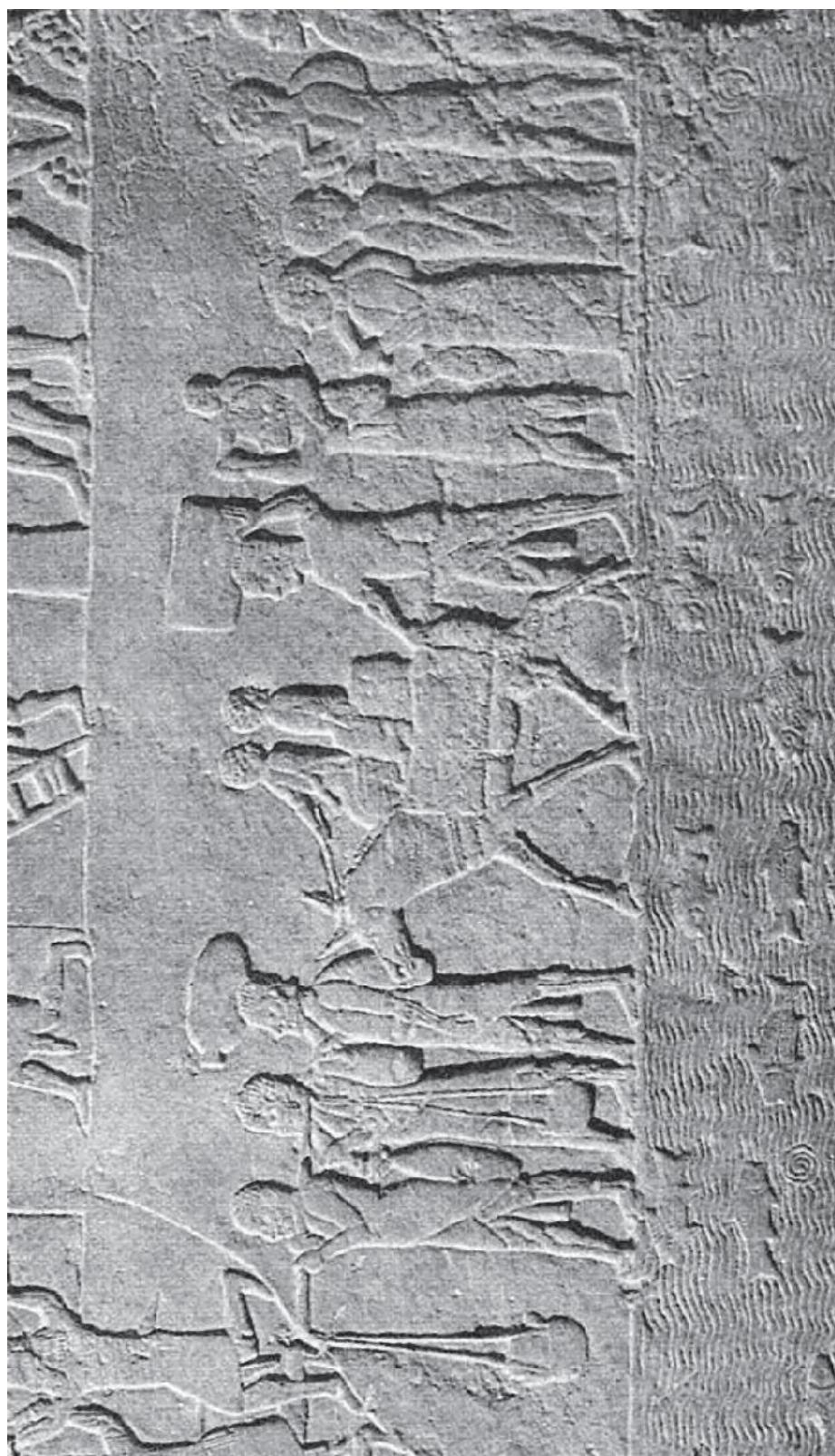


Figure 3. Egyptians departing the city with their belongings, detail of figure 2



Figure 4. A Chaldaean group of exiles, featuring a mother giving her child a drink from a pigskin (British Museum, WA 124954; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 5. The Assyrian battle against Hamanu, Elam (British Museum, WA 124919; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 6. Elamite prisoners in an Assyrian camp, detail of figure 5, left side of bottom register



Figure 7. Elamite prisoners in an Assyrian camp, detail of figure 5, right side of bottom register



Figure 8. Elamite and Chaldaean prisoners in an Assyrian camp, relief fragment from the battle of Hamanu series (British Museum, WA 124788; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)

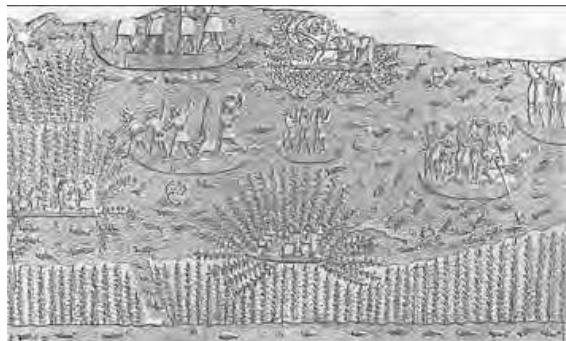


Figure 9. The Assyrian army capturing Chaldaeans in the southern marshes (British Museum, WA 124774; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 10. A group of Chaldaeans hiding in a reed bank, detail of figure 9



Figure 11. A relief panel from the Assyrian battle at Til Tuba (British Museum, WA 124801; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 12. Ashurbanipal and his queen banqueting in the royal garden (British Museum, WA 124920; © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



Figure 13. The Elamite king Teumman's head hanging in Ashurbanipal's garden, detail of figure 12